

PROLOGUE

Mummy is lost. She never came down in the morning like the other mums came. All the adults had worried faces but happy voices. It's a trick grown-ups always play but children can't be tricked as easily as they think. They kept on saying she'll be back, and she's probably taken a little morning walk and got lost in the bush, but I could see by their faces that they weren't sure. Police ladies even came. They were nice. They told all the kids not to be scared but they looked like I feel when there's a thunderstorm and I can feel the thunder grumbling in my tummy, like I'm sick but not sick. What if there's another thunderstorm? It was the worst one I've ever been in. Mummy said it was because we were in a valley and the thunder was echoing off the cliffs. I called out to her in the night because I was scared being in this big old, strange house, with the thunder so loud I could still hear it under the covers. And she came and did that thing where she pats my head but now there's no one to come and pat my head when I'm scared. And now that she's gone, I'm always scared.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Nathalie

March

The lights caught her eye, drew her gaze like a lure, like a charm. A strange feeling came over her and her fingers flicked the indicator before she'd had time to think, to doubt. The hotel was luminous, its windows aglow, as though the world inside held something enchanting. Something she hadn't felt for so long – hope, peace, *rest*. And then Nathalie was turning into the drive, leaving the rain-slicked city street behind. There were white-gloved hands ushering her in, and she was sliding down her window, acutely aware of the state of her car; the debris of life with small children. The snowfield of cracker crumbs, and apple cores browned and shrivelled like small dried hearts. She put the car in reverse. *What am I doing?* she thought. And then the door was opening for her and her legs were moving, and she was getting out.

‘Good evening, madam. Will you be staying for the evening?’

Nathalie found herself nodding, even as her heart raced and her breasts throbbed, rock-hard with unexpressed milk.

I could be a businesswoman, she thought. Just back from a late meeting in the city with clients. No one is going to know I'm a mother running from her life for the night.

'Will there be luggage to accompany you?' The gentleman had his head cocked politely.

The tone of his voice suggested the man had somehow intuited that there would be no luggage. Nathalie knew she probably looked stunned. Even she couldn't believe she was doing this. She glanced at her phone in her hand. It was 11 pm. On a Tuesday night. There were several missed calls from her husband. She wondered if the girls were asleep, but she knew Richie wouldn't be. Her breasts told her that. *You have left your newborn son. How could you?*

Guilt hit her in the chest like a punch. 'Oh, I should—' she turned back towards her car. What? Go home? Have to face him? Have to watch him try to lie? How would she even get the words out of her mouth? Her head throbbed. She needed another drink. The single glass of wine she'd had with her former colleagues had hardly even touched the edges.

I have dreamt of this, she wanted to tell the man with the white gloves. I never thought I was capable of actually doing it.

Instead she smiled at him as he took her keys and led her into the foyer. Stepping inside reminded her of opening a jewellery box she'd had as a child. When you lifted the lid soft tinkling music came out and a ballerina began to twirl before a tiny mirror. A sense that there was magic in the world, even for a moment. It smelled like freshly cut flowers and sweet, like vanilla bean ice cream. This was a place of order and quiet. There were solutions to problems with the flick of an elegant wrist. It was just as she'd imagined it on so many sleepless nights.

The Valley of Lost Stories

I could have driven to the Gap, Nathalie wanted to tell the woman as she handed over her credit card. She watched her neat efficiency and was comforted by it. I could have ended it all and left them motherless. Instead I am taking one night. Just one night. To work out what to do.

‘Just one night please.’ Her voice sounded foreign to her, too high pitched. Not the businesswoman she was pretending to be. It sounded like the voice of a mother who had reached the point of hysteria. To calm herself she reached out and touched the petals of the pale roses in the vase next to her, their heads distended, obscenely beautiful. The flesh was soft between her fingers.

‘Check-out will be 10 am,’ the woman said. ‘Please sign here.’ The surety of the process of checking in reassured her. People did this all the time. There were women who had three children and jobs, who travelled. She had just forgotten because she hardly left the house. Even orchestrating for her husband to be home in time to feed and bath the kids so that she could go to dinner in the city had been almost impossible. And the only reason he’d agreed was that he thought maybe she’d get some useful ‘contacts’ out of it. He was deluded in thinking that she could work from home while raising three children, two under five. She laughed under her breath and took the key card. The woman gave her an odd look. *I’m not even drunk yet, lady*, she thought.

Nathalie gripped the plastic card and headed over the plush carpet towards the lifts. Her phone had one bar left on it. She had no charger. As the lift ascended to the fourth floor, she considered whether she should text him and tell him where she was. So he wouldn’t worry. She thought about all the times she’d asked him

to come home at a reasonable hour – begged him, really – to help her at witching hour when the girls were screaming to be fed and Richie was inconsolable. And he routinely had a meeting, or an important function to attend, and sometimes he'd allude to her being the one who wanted three children, as though he played no part in it. Even though she had never wanted three. It had just happened. As life just happens and you live with it. As though he was removed in some essential way from the way their life was.

Now she knew why. He'd been meeting this woman. In expensive city hotels just like this. The pain stretched freshly in her chest and the lift door pinged open. She switched her phone off. No. He could be a father for one night, feel the full weight of responsibility.

She closed the heavy door behind her. Silence, pure and thick enveloped her like a hug. She kicked off her heels and lay on the king-sized bed. The bedding was clean and crisp against her skin. If she closed her eyes she could go to sleep right now and not wake for ten hours straight. It was so tempting. The tiredness was bone-deep. Instead she peeled herself off the bed and went into the bathroom to run the bath. While the water roared, she opened the bar cupboard and found a bottle of pinot noir. She poured herself a generous glass and took a sip. As soon as she swallowed the wine, she knew she'd made the right decision. She reached for her phone and switched it back on. She really should tell him she was here. He'd worry. Part of her said 'let him' but the other part ached for her children. For their uncertainty. She tapped out a message. *I'm staying in a hotel tonight. I know about your lover. You forwarded the concert tickets to me instead of her.* She thought about saying something vindictive,

but found she didn't have the energy. *I might be back tomorrow.* She pressed send and pressed her palms into her eye sockets.

The bath was warm, and the wine had made her sleepy. Milk leaked from her breasts into the water in fine white lines, as though she were a sea creature. Tears squeezed from her eyes. Relief and guilt poured out of her and mingled so that she couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. It would be so easy to go to sleep and never have to wake up. Never have to face everything. She hadn't thought about ending her life before. But right now, it would be possible. The sadness felt like a whole sea, swelling inside her, taking up all the space.

Hey Ruby girl, can't wait to spend this special night with you. I've booked a hotel room for after. Her husband's words – so full of an energy she hadn't sensed in him for years – floated into her consciousness and she drained her wine glass.

She turned the hot water up until her skin scalded, until the bathroom bloated with steam. In the white haze another life opened up in her mind. She was an academic about to travel to Paris on a 6 am flight. She could almost see it, this imaginary life, shimmering in her mind. Maybe it could have been her life if she'd chosen a different path. If she'd chosen a different man. If she hadn't had three children. She could be heading to France for a conference at the Sorbonne, a small suitcase by her bed filled with chic business attire. This could have been her. She had been an academic seven years ago, in the Sydney University French department. Her desk had overlooked the city in the distance. She'd had time to read Camus and Sartre and discuss with her students their use of imagery and language.

That language was almost lost to her now, like a dream. *Un rêve bizarre.* She spoke the words under her breath. They

didn't sound like her own. She turned off the taps and pulled herself up to sitting, pressed her forehead to her knees. Her skin glowed, the same swollen pink as those rose petals in the foyer, and the room spun. Why the hell couldn't that be her life? She could book a plane ticket online right now, before her phone battery ran out. She could disappear. Start a new life. It was better than having to face him. It was better than dying.

She stood and her equilibrium was gone. She found herself on the cold tiles without knowledge of having fallen. As she retched into the toilet bowl cool tears ran down her face. The lid of the enchanted jewellery box slammed shut. And she realised with equal parts relief and dread, that she could never, ever abandon her children.

Jean

1948

The hotel glowed against the cliffs like a trick of the light. Music echoed through the still night air. They called it the grandest hotel west of the Blue Mountains. The staircase in the foyer was built from the finest marble. It was rumoured to have taken a hundred men to transport the slabs into the valley. At dusk white statues shone in the gardens and Jean would wonder about what life was like inside its halls, where the mining officials, the wealthy and the important stayed when they visited.

The music called to her like a siren song. She would feel its stirrings in her belly, her body swaying unconsciously. That old muscle memory. She'd wonder which dance everyone was dancing. The Lindy Hop? The Balboa? The West Coast Swing? She used to know such things. She used to instigate such things. She used to be one of the women swirling in their full skirts, the filmy fabric catching the candlelight. The

champagne, the delicacies, the fragrant haze of cigar smoke. She had known it all. And then she would shake her head and turn back to the task at hand. That wasn't her life anymore. She wasn't that person anymore. She'd tell herself the music had no purchase. She'd shut the windows and the doors against it, keeping her feet planted firmly on the ground. There was wood to chop and fires to light before the dusk ushered in the cold night and Robert would be hungry for dinner.

But tonight was different. Tonight she could not resist the beat in her blood. The music had been louder, more insistent than usual. It had felt like a twin heartbeat in her chest all evening as they ate their meal and she read Liv a story before bed. She knew that she must glimpse inside that life, even just for a moment. Just a sliver, a taste would be enough to fill her up.

By the time Jean reached the hotel by foot it was well after midnight. She could smell the chalky dust from the road on her dress. The music coming from inside was beautiful; mournful and slow. The kind of music to rest one's head on a man's shoulder. She had dressed in her best dress. Black because it was always elegant. Now it would just be dusty. As she looked through the window, she saw the women inside dancing and her heart sank. They were officers' and town officials' wives. Their hats were from Sydney's top milliners. Their dresses had not been sewn by hand at machines on the kitchen table, they'd been purchased in department stores and wrapped in delicate tissue. The only way valley women could purchase a new frock was from a hawker who – rumour had it – sold clothing taken from a Sydney morgue. These women wore gloves that extended past their elbows and their lips were stained with expensive lipstick. Had she been so stupid to think

she'd somehow steal into this place? She slept under a blanket sewn from sugar bags and wore the second-hand clothing of dead people.

The hotel doors flung open and a woman tripped out. Her blonde hair was pinned into fashionable curls with exquisite red clips and she wobbled on matching red heels. She swung around, as though sensing Jean's presence under the tall arched window.

'Oh, I didn't see you there.' The woman's gaze was hazy, as though she needed spectacles but wasn't wearing them.

'Oh,' said Jean, feeling her face warm in the dark as the woman moved towards her. Her body swayed a little, but whether from languor or wine, she couldn't tell. Jean herself had taken a glass of sherry for courage before sneaking out of the house.

'Let's sit out here and smoke, shall we? It's so hot in there.' The woman adjusted her long red satin gloves and perched on a garden seat, placed a cigarette between her lips.

Jean looked around. The only other beings were the nymph statues in the garden, gleaming in the bright moonlight. Was this woman talking to her?

The woman held out cigarettes. Jean moved towards her and took one tentatively from a beautiful silver case. She sat down next to her, acutely aware of her plain dress and cheap rouge. The woman's nails were the exact same shade of red as the rest of her ensemble.

'Oh, these parties are such a bore sometimes, aren't they?' The woman took a long drag and sighed out the smoke. 'I just needed to get some air. You know, it's so beautiful out here. So quiet. Look at those stars. Those cliffs.'

They both looked up at the stars salting the sky.

‘Oh, I feel rather ill doing that. I’m afraid I’ve had a little champagne. Sorry, I’ve been so rude, I’m Clara. Clara Black.’

Jean took her hand and nodded politely. Should she give another name? Her mind was racing. ‘Jean,’ she said, wondering if the woman had even guessed that she was an interloper, with her poor dress and dusty shoes. She took a drag from the cigarette, which was much smoother than the ones she sometimes pinched from Robert.

Clara looked at her. ‘So, how do you like life out here, Jean?’

Jean paused, unsure of how to answer the question, unsure of whether Clara had pegged her as an intruder. ‘You mean in the valley?’

‘Yes, I mean, we’re so far from civilisation out here. It’s kind of an amazing place, don’t you think?’

Jean was silent. Only an official’s wife could think this. Jean lived in a roughly constructed fibro house that sweltered in the heat, froze in the cold and had rats, and she was considered one of the lucky ones because she wasn’t still in a tent. Robert came home black with oil from the mines each night. She took a guess about Clara Black. ‘Do you live in the hotel?’

Clara nodded. ‘Yes, they tell us there’ll be fabulous new housing built, but we just have to make do with living in a hotel for now.’

Jean cleared her throat. The hotel had a winding marble staircase, long, cool corridors and food that came via wait staff out of an industrial kitchen, or at least that’s what she’d heard. ‘What’s it like?’

‘Oh, well, it’s a nice enough hotel, for these parts, you’d have to agree. But the rooms are very small, and we all have

to share bathrooms, so it's far from ideal. Where have they put you?' Clara took a lipstick out of her purse and pressed it to her bottom lip.

'Oh, I love that shade of red,' said Jean, keen to steer the conversation away from living quarters.

Clara passed her the lipstick. 'Here, try it. It would suit your skin tone, too.'

Jean took the delicate gold case in her fingers. It was an Elizabeth Arden lipstick. She painted her top lip and then pressed her lips together. The movement was fluid. Her body remembered. All those times she had applied her lipstick this way, without a mirror, when her life had necessitated the painting of lips.

Clara stood and stretched her arms. 'I can't bear to go back in there. I might take a walk around the grounds. I hear the whole valley is haunted. The massacres of the Aborigines here at first settlement. It was a long time ago but still it's terrible. That's what the other wives whisper about anyway. But I don't find it frightening here. Well, it's not the bush that I'm frightened of.' Clara removed the red hairclips and let her long hair fall down her back. It made her appear younger. 'But I don't believe in ghosts, do you?'

Jean shook her head. If there were ghosts anywhere, they would be here. She too had heard about the Black people being killed by the whites in this area. Women and children, too. She hugged her arms close.

'Here. These would look pretty in your beautiful dark hair.' She pinned one of the red clips behind Jean's left ear. Clara stretched her hands to the sky, slipped off her heels and walked barefoot away from the hotel.

‘Are you sure you should go walking by yourself? And barefoot? You could step on a snake.’ Jean was about to tell Clara about the snake Robert had found curled under their front step a few days ago, but that would have given herself away. ‘I could come,’ Jean said.

‘Oh, no, I want to go by myself.’ Clara waved a hand and slipped off one of her long red gloves and then the other and flung them behind her. Jean had to stop herself from gasping.

‘Don’t you ever just want to be alone? The cool night air on your skin, no one knowing where you are? Sometimes it can be like a prison in this valley. So far from everyone and everything.’

Jean nodded. *I know that feeling*, she thought. She picked up the gloves from the ground. She ran her fingers over the smooth silky fabric. She did know that feeling of wanting to be alone. That’s what had brought her here, to the hotel, late in the evening while her child and husband slept. She could never tell Clara this. It was one thing getting some air by yourself slightly giddy at a party, it was another sneaking away from your family for a glimpse into another life.

‘I shall be back. You keep a watch out for devastatingly dashing men. But don’t send them my way.’ Clara laughed.

Jean laughed too and watched the night claim her, the luminous white of her hair fading into the shadows. Jean’s heart was beating fast. Maybe she shouldn’t have let her go off alone. She seemed a little dreamy with wine. But she’d be back. She slipped her foot out of her dusty black pump and into one of Clara’s beautiful red shoes. It was a little too big, but it fit. She admired the way the shoes shone, even in the low light. She would never own a pair of shoes this beautiful. She put both on and stood up, wobbling as she did. She looked around self-consciously as she

slipped the gloves up to her elbows. They felt right. Like a second skin. Suddenly this life, the valley felt like the ill-fitting costume. She felt so glamorous. No longer did she have on only a boring black dress. She caught the reflection of herself in a dark window. She was about to peel off the gloves when the heavy door to the hotel swung open and two men and a woman stumbled out, bringing with them the sound of loud, upbeat music and the smell of cigarettes and perfume.

‘Oh my, it’s deliciously cool out here.’ The woman fanned herself with her hands. ‘Hello. You have the right idea. Oh, can we pinch a cigarette?’

Jean realised that Clara had left her beautiful silver cigarette case on the seat. She looked around, feeling guilt tighten her throat. She glanced in the direction she’d seen Clara go but there was nothing but the glowing nymphs, the dark garden.

‘Of course,’ she said and offered the woman a cigarette. One of the men produced a box of matches and lit it. The woman’s eyes were made up with dark kohl, lending her an exotic and mysterious air. None of the women Jean was around in the township wore eye make-up. She wished immediately to make this effect on her own eyes.

‘What are you doing out here all by yourself?’ One of the men was looking at Jean in a way that made her breath shallow. She was still wearing Clara’s shoes and gloves, her own shoes lying suspiciously at her feet. She was going to be found out. Here she was wearing another woman’s things.

‘Just catching my breath.’

The man stuck out his arm for her to take. ‘Well, these two will no doubt be kissing soon, so will you join me back on the dance floor? The band is rather good, even for these parts.’

Jean looked around wildly. 'Well, I'm just ... my friend ...'
She peered once again into the night.

The man continued to hold out his arm. 'I'm Magnus Varesso. And you are?'

Jean was completely taken aback by this man's name, so foreign and famous sounding.

'Serpentine Rose.' The name slid from her mouth before her mind caught up and she pressed her fingers to her lips. The lipstick, the gloves, the shoes. They had tricked her into imagining she was Serpentine Rose again, about to take to the stage, about to surrender her body to the music.

'Well, it's lovely to meet you, Miss Rose.'

Jean was shocked he had believed her. She felt a flush of shame rise to colour her cheeks. Serpentine Rose had died a long time ago. She was Jean Peters, married to Robert Peters. But she let Magnus lead her inside the hotel with her red gloves and red shoes and the sparkling clasp behind her ear.